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ABSTRACT

The current knowledge about what distinguishes productive and vital faculty members from their less dynamic peers is considered, along with additional information needs. Most empirical evidence on faculty productivity concerns only research and publication. Information is inadequate about other forms of faculty achievement and vitality, including other professional service activities. More research is needed to clarify the range of ways professors remain creative and productive in the later stages of their work lives. Information on the correlates (e.g., personal attributes, environmental conditions) of the vital academic career can help explain such issues as: the extent to which career vitality is a function of personal orientations, the effect of organizational conditions and the broader environmental climate, and ways that colleges can foster enthusiasm and achievement in the academic career. Available research on faculty vitality has explored areas such as: the influence of professors' self-expectations, faculty receptivity to change, peer relationships, opportunities for research and professional development, and institutional reward systems. Topics for future research are suggested. (SW)

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Correlates of the Vital Academic Career:

What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
of the Association for the Study of Higher Education

March 1985
Chicago, Illinois

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago a puzzle called "Rubik's Cube" had everyone who tried it baffled and searching for a solution. An even more difficult puzzle continues to perplex college deans, department chairpersons, and, most of all, professors themselves. Their quandary is: Why do some senior faculty members (tenured, post-midcareer) in colleges and universities remain creative, engaged in their work, and highly productive? At the same time, other veteran professors, working in essentially the same environment, seem to wither on the vine--lose enthusiasm for their duties and become less productive.

Underutilized academic talent is always regrettable. However, higher education is now in a period when unenthusiastic and uncreative faculty members represent the academic equivalent of napping firefighters in a smoldering firehouse. Colleges and universities today are faced with a knowledge explosion, rapid advances in technology, and erratically shifting enrollment patterns. Their capacity to respond is limited by restricted economic resources, an aging, highly tenured faculty, and minimal opportunities to hire new personnel with needed forms of expertise and skill. Under these conditions, it is imperative that current professors remain vigorous contributors to the academic community.

However, an assessment of the faculty at almost any higher education institution would reveal a wide distribution on a scale of vitality. Nelsen (1981), in Renewal of the Teacher-Scholar, relates a dean's three part faculty classification scheme. It includes:

1. Productive faculty who will renew themselves and be productive even with very little aid and encouragement;

2. Faculty who provide minimal output no matter what the incentives;
3. Faculty who could go either way. This fairly large group requires some stimulation and assistance in order to remain up-to-date and fully effective (p. 14).

Related research on faculty careers (Pelz and Andrews, 1966) suggests that professors commonly go through recurring periods of achievement separated by latent or less productive periods. Highly successful veteran academics, however, always seem to be more involved in their work and more achievement oriented than colleagues whose careers appear eventually to reach a plateau.

Higher education needs to learn more about its especially vital senior professors. It needs to know who they are, how they divide their time among their responsibilities, and what "makes them tick". For instance, what attributes distinguish them from their less dynamic cohorts? What environmental (particularly organizational) variables support the professional activities of vital seasoned academics?

Miller sees vitality "as the return on investment that results from applying [one's] capability to meaningful activity which stretches and through achievement adds to capability (1979, p. 1). He asserts that vitality can result from learning, from improved capacity to employ knowledge and skills, or from the "warm feeling one gains from knowing one has contributed (Miller, 1979, p. 1).

Certainly the concept of vitality is relevant to an understanding of the academic career. Some professors are clearly more vital than others. But how can we account for this difference?

RESEARCH ON THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION: WHAT DO WE KNOW? WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

Available research on the academic profession outlines some elements of our puzzle. Scholars, for example, have studied professors' productivity

Several investigators (Roe, 1972; Behymer, 1974; Cole, 1979) report that faculty with an established record of research productivity early in their careers remain productive over time. In contrast, however, several investigations have discovered a decline in research and publication among many academics at later career stages. Fulton and Trow (1974) found that the percentage of "inactive" publishers in research institutions begins to rise after age 50. Similarly, Bayer and Dutton (1977) found only a slight decline in the proportion of highly productive faculty with 25 years of experience but a substantial increase in nonproducing (i.e., nonpublishing) faculty overall.

Several studies have attempted to explain this trend. Parsons and Platt (1968) suggest that with advancing age faculty research priorities move toward broader, more theoretical and integrative inquiries and away from narrower, empirical research. Due to the longer "incubation period" required by the former type of research, publication rates may slow in the later phases of the academic career (Finkelstein, 1984, p. 103). Some researchers (Behymer, 1974; Fulton and Trow, 1974; Baldwin, 1979) have chronicled a decline in professors' research interests and research-related goals over time. Research I have conducted on liberal arts college professors (Baldwin, 1979) indicates that broader types of professional interests (e.g., service to one's institution, mentoring younger colleagues, involvement in professional associations) may supplement earlier research orientations of college professors.

Regrettably, the great majority of empirical evidence on faculty productivity concerns only research and publication. Our knowledge of other forms of academic achievement, and hence other forms of vitality, is inadequate to assess the extent to which members of the academic profession remain

active in other forms of valuable professional work. Finkelstein, in his survey of research on the American academic profession, concludes that "we know very little about faculty performance in their administrative or extra-institutional professional service capacities." (1984, p. 127).

Yet these activities, along with research, are major elements of the academic career. Relevant research that is available indicates that as professors' initial research and teaching interests decrease their careers often "branch out" by assuming administrative assignments, developing new areas of expertise, consulting, or by taking a more active role in scholarly societies or service organizations (Baldwin 1979a, 1979b).

Scholarship and publication are important but incomplete measures of the vitality of veteran college and university professors. The available data reflect the dominance of the standard academic model and its heavy emphasis on research productivity. To paint an accurate picture of the vital academic career, more research is needed to clarify the range of ways professors remain creative and productive in the later stages of their work lives.

A description of the vital academic career in its various forms could be quite enlightening to academic administrators, faculty personnel committees, faculty development organizations, and individual professors. However, alone it will not be sufficient to guide the development of policies and programs that will foster vitality among veteran college professors. Information on the correlates (e.g., personal attributes, environmental conditions) of the vital academic career is also essential.

Such information could help to explain to what extent career vitality is a function of personal orientations? Are some professors predisposed to remain creative and energetic throughout their work lives while others

are destined to lose career momentum once they surpass the hurdles of tenure and promotion? Information on the correlates of the vital academic career should clarify to what degree career vitality is a function of organizational conditions and broader environmental climate. Are there some steps higher education institutions can take to foster enthusiasm and achievement at later stages of the academic career? A more complex question concerns how personal attributes and environment interact. Will some types of senior academics prosper under certain organizational conditions or supports but not under others?

Some available research contributes to the discussion of the correlates of the vital academic career. Borland (1970) and Hinds et al., (1974) suggest that professors' goals and activities are a function of internalized professional standards more than of institutional expectations (as reflected in such things as workload assignment, chairperson expectations). DeVries (1975) discovered that "self-expectations" were the best predictor of a professor's allocation of time among teaching, research, and administration. Indeed, Fulton and Trow (1974) learned that research-oriented faculty at nonresearch-oriented institutions managed to pursue their scholarly interests in spite of the less supportive environment they inhabit. Finkelstein (1984) concludes from a review of studies on faculty in research institutions that the incentives comprising the academic reward system do not have a substantial impact on professors' performance in their various roles.

Receptivity to change may also be an important personal attribute that is related to vitality. Finkelstein (1984) draws on studies of faculty open mindedness (Kazlow, 1977), flexibility (Evans and Leepman, 1968), and dogmatism (Kazlow, 1977) to identify a "change orientation" factor. Apparently some professors are attitudinally more open to certain types of innovation

than are their colleagues.

Taken together these findings suggest that professors' personal orientations have a great deal to do with the emphasis, quality, and vigor of their work, regardless of institutional efforts to influence their behavior. On the other hand, studies also indicate that various incentives and situational factors may be related to faculty vigor and productivity. Ladd and Lipset (1976), for example, found that competency and congeniality of colleagues and opportunities for research and professional development were factors in the job changing decisions of very high achieving faculty at prestigious universities.

Finkelstein (1984) cites seven variables closely related to publication productivity. Of these, three--communication with disciplinary colleagues, number of journal subscriptions, and time allocation among academic role components--are environmental factors that higher education institutions can help to regulate in a positive manner. Finkelstein concludes that individual predispositions to research and publication can be reinforced by a supportive climate at both the departmental and institutional levels.

Dorfman et al. (1982) found a related pattern in a study of retired academics. Those professors who remained most active professionally as emeritus faculty were those whose associations "radiated outward from local departments and colleagues to colleagues, [former students] and professional organizations outside the institution" (Dorfman et al., 1982, p. 263).

Kanter (1977), drawing from research in business corporations, found that workers' levels of aspiration and work involvement varied with perceived opportunities for professional growth. It seems likely that professors who interact meaningfully with colleagues, who continue learning on the job, and who have time to devote to valued roles will remain vital members

of the academic work force.

Understandably, an effort to define the correlates of the vital academic career must acknowledge significant variations in the academic role at different types of institutions and within different fields of study. Workload assignments and reward systems certainly vary among research universities and predominantly teaching institutions. The principal forms of professional activity, likewise, differ among disciplines. The attributes and activities of a vital music professor must be distinct from those of a vital professor of political science or zoology.

CONCLUSION

Research on the academic profession tells us that many vigorous senior professors are active publishers. However, it tells us little about the other ways professors remain professionally involved and productive in later career stages. Further investigations could help to clarify the vital academic career in its alternate forms. Higher education needs to recognize and support veteran professors who make valuable contributions through avenues such as organizational governance, student advising, curriculum planning, course design, mentoring junior colleagues, work with alumni, or interpreting their specialities to the larger public.

Studies of academics tell us that vital professors are an intrinsically motivated group. Working conditions and extrinsic incentives are not as important to professors' productivity as are personal interest and internalized professional standards.

Yet research also shows that colleague climate, distribution of workload, and other external variables can influence the activities of faculty members. At present our knowledge of the impact of various conditions on professors'

achievements is minimal. Higher education needs to outline in more detail what factors are closely associated with continued vitality among senior academics. (It would also be valuable to clarify what factors may serve to extinguish professors' enthusiasm for their various duties.) Future studies should examine the relationship between the vital academic career and such factors as overall state of health, physical fitness, range of activities (formal and informal) for colleague interaction, diversity of opportunities for professional growth, rotation of courses and other professional responsibilities, funds for travel to professional meetings, encouragement for development from deans and department chairpersons, alternative reward systems (monetary and nonmonetary), and post-tenure evaluation systems.

A generic definition of "the vital career" is likely to remain elusive in a realm as complex as the academic profession. Nonetheless, the task is not futile. Identification of the correlates of the vital academic career should reveal an assortment of factors that individually and collectively can facilitate the effective professional performance of established members of the academic profession. Research that sheds additional light on the careers of vigorous older college professors will make it more feasible to sustain vitality throughout the work lives of all professors.

Previous research on college and university professors has established a framework for further investigations. It has illuminated important attributes of faculty careers that continue to flourish over time, but it has also left many complicated questions unanswered. The puzzle that perplexes faculty members and administrators alike is likely to remain a mystery until higher education scholars succeed in clarifying the principal correlates of the vital academic career.

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